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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 005627

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [BG](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: "SUICIDE" BOMBER MARKS ESCALATION OF EXTREMIST VIOLENCE

REF: A. DHAKA 04090

[1](#)B. DHAKA 05593

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reasons para 1.4 d.

[1](#)1. (S) Summary. The November 15 assassination of two provincial judges, and the perception that the attacker meant to martyr himself for Islamic glory, marks a worrisome growth in the evolution of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh. The recurring attacks on the judiciary have upped the political stakes for the BNP and the anxiety of civil society. JMB, the putative mastermind of the attacks, has mutated from being seen as a relatively small regional outfit, pre-August 17, to a mastermind of national terror. The BDG's failure to capture even one of the JMB's shadowy leaders adds to JMB's mystique. The BDG is scrambling to provide security for courthouses and senior judges, to catch JMB bombers, and to prevent future attacks, but it continues to resist viewing JMB as a manifestation of home-grown religious extremism, largely because of its determination to preserve the cohesiveness of the ruling BNP-Islamist coalition. The judges' service association has demanded that the BDG guarantee the security of judges by November 21, the day before a mass opposition rally in Dhaka. It is unclear if the opposition has finally found an issue to galvanize anti-BDG pressure, but there is a growing sense of unease -- even among ruling party members -- that the JMB campaign of violence will only escalate. End Summary.

The Drumbeat Intensifies

[1](#)2. (C) On August 17, more than 400 small bombs rattled government facilities and public areas across Bangladesh (ref a). The design and placement of the bombs indicated the bombers' objective was to send a message, not inflict mass casualties. A banned group named Jamaat ul-Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) claimed responsibility for the blasts in leaflets found at the sites. After initial skepticism that JMB had the ability or the reach to mount a coordinated nationwide attack, BDG security services shifted gear after suspects confessed to acting as part of a JMB campaign to install sharia law in Bangladesh. The BDG maintained that the bombers were orchestrated by a foreign influence (read India), and cranked up a disorganized multi-agency effort to catch the bombers. The ruling BNP's Islamist coalition partners, Jamaat Islami Bangladesh (JIB) and Islami Oikyya Jote, condemned the bombings as contrary to Islam.

[1](#)3. (C) On November 15, a bomb-carrying assailant killed two judges in the southeastern city of Jhalakathi (ref b), the seventh assault on a courthouse or a judge claimed by JMB since August 17. The Jhalakathi attack marked a turning point, however, because the injured attacker was found to have a second IED attached to his thigh, he reportedly tried to blow himself up after he was caught, and he told reporters from his hospital bed that he was a suicide attacker committed to the JMB campaign to end "man-made" (i.e., non-sharia) law in Bangladesh. Some details remain murky but the attacker, Mamun, was clearly fluent in martyrdom rhetoric. Home Minister of State Babar confided to Charge that the possibility that Mamun was Bangladesh's first suicide bomber "could not be ruled out." Many Bangladeshis, encouraged by newspaper headlines, have concluded that Mamun was a suicide bomber and speculate on when the next one will come.

A Pattern Emerges

[1](#)4. (C) Three months after the August 17 blasts, it seems apparent that:

A) The August 17 blasts were not an isolated episode. Rather than being just a shot across the bows to announce JMB's arrival or to pressure the BDG on some particular point, like releasing spiritual leader Prof. Assadullah Galib, it was the start of a broader campaign that at this point shows no sign of abetting.

B) JMB has leapt from being perceived as a relatively minor regional group to an effective organization with national reach. Like Bangla Bhai's JMJB before it, JMB has achieved such a fearsome profile that others are now invoking its name to make hoaxes or threaten primarily reporters for various

reasons, including extortion.

C) Achieving Islamic law is JMB's primary objective, at least ostensibly. It has listed government officials and agents of Western/"Crusader" interests as additional enemies of Islam, but the judiciary was a major target of the August 17 blasts and it has been the exclusive focus of its attacks since then. Even if JMB has an ulterior agenda, attacking judges is covering itself in zealously Islamist hues.

D) The BDG has made the tactical decision to go after JMB attackers, in part to prevent future attacks and deflect mounting domestic and foreign political pressure for action. However, it is unable or unwilling to capture district or national leaders of JMB, and it continues to resist acknowledging that home-grown religious extremism is a real problem.

E) Jamaat Islami is on the defensive over allegations that some of the bombers have past or current links to JIB or its violent student wing. Beyond stoutly denying any ties to the bombers and condemning the violence as "un-Islamic," JIB officials note privately that it was three BNP leaders in Rajshahi who recruited and protected Bangla Bhai. They insist that JIB is successfully committed to the political process and that it can only lose by association with a campaign of terror. Ironically, mounting pressure on the BNP could further boost its dependence on JIB as an electoral partner.

#### Immediate Challenges

15. (C) Several mostly pro-Awami League (AL) lawyer groups have launched boycotts and protests over the attacks, and the judges' service association has demanded that the BDG "guarantee" the security of judges by November 21, the day before a mass opposition rally in Dhaka designed to kick off yet another month of national agitation to force the BDG to hold early elections. Attacking the judiciary has upped the political pressure on the BNP because, if the courts are significantly disrupted, assertions will spread that the BDG is unable to govern. Even at the more corrupt lower levels, the judiciary remains, after the military, Bangladesh's most venerable government institution, and attacks on it are deeply worrisome to civil society. The BDG has scrambled to provide bodyguards for about 75 senior judges, but it cannot "guarantee" security for all 877 judges, much less the 700 to 800 magistrates who, as members of the Executive branch, adjudicate issues at the local level.

#### Issues To Watch

16. (C) Will the JMB attacks, and the BDG's failure to capture seven senior JMB leaders, finally give the AL an issue to generate real pressure on the BNP? Education Minister Farooq gloomily predicted to Charge that JMB attacks would spread to local government officials and then MP's. Will the broader civil service feel threatened and join the opposition? The civil service has been alienated by BNP promotion and assignment policies, and in 1996 its delegation to then President expressing concern about the prevailing political instability was a major factor in forcing the BNP government to accede to new elections.

17. (S) Will JMB violence expand to include foreigners or minorities? BDG officials downplay the impact of JMB attacks on foreign investment by noting that no foreigners have been attacked. JMB detainees have reportedly told interrogators that they are unaware of any plans to target Westerners, which would not be surprising given the detainees' junior status. Interestingly, there has been no comment on the fact that at least two of the judges attacked by JMB are Hindus, a reflection of the widespread acceptance of Hindus in public service and also because there is no evidence or JMB claim that they were targeted because of their faith. However, there could be as many as 100 non-Muslim judges (mostly Hindus), and in the JMB universe they are presumably unfit to interpret Islamic law.

18. (C) Will the BDG make the strategic decision to recognize that Islamic extremism is a real problem? Will it take some relatively easy steps, like creating a CT bureau in DGFI or holding accountable wayward ruling coalition members, to improve its chances of defeating the JMB? Or will it continue to blame the attacks on people (i.e., India and the opposition) who want to destabilize the government? Late November 17, local media reported that the Bangladesh Rifles have recovered explosives near the Indian border in Sylhet similar to those used in a JMB attack; this could be a prelude to reasserting an Indian connection to the violence and even a response to Indian PM Singh's counter-terrorism warnings to Pakistan and Bangladesh at the SAARC summit.

19. (C) How committed is JMB to challenging the political status quo? Some Bangladeshis allege there was a truce that

led to the JMB's postponing attacks until after the SAARC summit; AL president Sheikh Hasina predictably attributed that timing to proof that the bombers acted at BDG direction.

Will JMB expand its target list to include political leaders? Political violence in Bangladesh traditionally plays out at the lower levels, which is one reason the attacks in the past two years on AL leaders are viewed as so alarming. However, before the JMB onslaught, no judge to our knowledge had ever been killed in Bangladesh, and Ahsanullah Master and Shah Kibria are the only serving MP's who have been assassinated in office. The assassination of the two Jhalakathi judges may have been a bungled suicide attack; will there be a more clear-cut next time?

Comment and Next Steps

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10. (S) Three months after the August 17 attacks, we have crossed one and perhaps two important tripwires: the continuation of terrorist attacks, and the introduction of suicide bombers. Septels next week will assess BDG efforts to defeat the JMB, suggest benchmarks for gauging BDG performance, and propose a game plan for focusing the BDG on its terrorist challenge.

CHAMMAS